The invention in which an exclusive right is claimed is defined by the following:

1.   A method for enabling a host player to select one or more other participants to join in playing a multiplayer online electronic game, comprising the steps of:

(a)   enabling the host player to create a list of contacts comprising one or more other persons who may be interested in participating in playing the multiplayer online electronic game;

(b)   enabling the host player to select one or more of the other persons from among the list of contacts to participate in playing the multiplayer online electronic game;

(c)   automatically sending an electronic invitation to each of the one or more other persons selected by the host player, to join in playing the multiplayer online electronic game; and

(d)   enabling each of the one or more other persons who receive the electronic invitation that was automatically sent, to selectively join the multiplayer online electronic game as a participant.

2.   The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of providing an availability status for each person in the list of contacts so as to enable the host player to identify persons in the list of contacts who are currently available to participate in playing the multiplayer online electronic game.

3.   The method of Claim 2, further comprising the step of enabling each person in the list of contacts to select an availability status indicating the person's availability for participating in playing a multiplayer online electronic game.

4.   The method of Claim 1, wherein the host player is enabled to build a list of chat contacts through use of an online messaging service, said list of chat contacts automatically being parsed to create the list of contacts.

5.   The method of Claim 4, wherein at least one person in the list of contacts is not currently logged into the online messaging service and has been invited to join the multiplayer online electronic game, further comprising the step of automatically forwarding the electronic invitation to join the multiplayer online electronic game to said at least one person when said at least one person logs into the online messaging service.

6.   The method of Claim 4, wherein selection of game participants and voice chat communications before and during game play is facilitated by a gaming utility that runs on an electronic device operated by each game participant and at least one person in the list of contacts has been invited to join the multiplayer online electronic game and has not started an instance of the gaming utility on the electronic device(s) operated by said at least one person, further comprising the step of automatically forwarding the electronic invitation to join the multiplayer online electronic game to said at least one person when said at least one person launches an instance of the gaming utility on the electronic device(s) operated by said at least one person.

7.   The method of Claim 4, further comprising the step of providing an availability status for each person in the list of contacts so as to enable the host player to identify persons in the list of contacts who are currently available for playing the multiplayer online electronic game, said availability status being determined by the online messaging service.

8.   The method of Claim 1, wherein the electronic invitation comprises a verbal message.

9.   The method of Claim 8, further comprising the step of enabling the electronic invitation to be accepted by a person invited to join the game through a verbal response spoken by said person.

10.   The method of Claim 1, further comprising the steps of providing a list of multiplayer online electronic games to the host player; and enabling the host player to select the multiplayer online electronic game from said list of multiplayer online electronic games.

11.   The method of Claim 1, further comprising the steps of:

(a)   providing a user interface including a first display area on which the list of contacts is displayed and a second display area corresponding to a voice chat session; and

(b)   enabling the host to select the one or more contracts to invite to join the voice chat session by selecting one or more contacts from among the list of contacts displayed in the first display area and dragging and dropping them onto the second display area.

12.   The method of Claim 11, wherein a plurality of contacts can be selected and dragged and dropped onto the second display area at one time.

13.   A computer readable medium having computer executable instructions for performing the steps recited in Claim 1.

14.   A method for enabling a host player to select one or more other players to participate in a multiplayer online electronic game played using a plurality of electronic devices linked in communication over a communications network, each of said plurality of electronic devices being operated by a different player, the method comprising the steps of:

(a)   enabling the host player to initiate a chat session;

(b)   enabling the host player to invite one or more other players to join the chat session;

(c)   enabling any of the players who were invited by the host, to be a participant in the chat session; and

(d)   automatically launching an instance of the multiplayer online electronic game on each electronic device being operated by any player participating in the chat session, said step of automatically launching being in response to a game initiating action performed by the host player so that any player participating in the chat session automatically becomes a participant in the multiplayer online electronic game.

15.   The method of Claim 14, further comprising the step of providing a network address of the electronic device the host player is using and operating so as to enable the host player to invite one or more other players to join in playing the multiplayer online electronic game, by referencing said network address.

16. The method of Claim 14, wherein the host player is a member of an online messaging service that enables the host player to build a player contact list comprising a list of one or more players with whom the host prefers to chat and/or play multiplayer online electronic games, further comprising the steps of:

(a) displaying the player contact list to the host player; and

(b) enabling the host player to select one or more other players to participate in playing the multiplayer online electronic game from the player contact list.

17. The method of Claim 16, further comprising the step of providing an availability status for each player in the player contact list.

18. The method of Claim 16, further comprising the step of enabling each player to select an availability status indicating the player's availability to join a chat session.

19. The method of Claim 16, further comprising the steps of:

(a) providing a user interface including a first display area on which the list of contacts is displayed and a second display area corresponding to a voice chat session; and

(b) enabling the host to select the one or more contracts to invite to join the voice chat session by selecting one or more contacts from among the list of contacts displayed in the first display area and dragging and dropping them onto the second display area.

20. The method of Claim 19, wherein a plurality of contacts can be selected and dragged and dropped onto the second display area at one time.

21. The method of Claim 14, further comprising the step of sending an electronic invitation to join the chat session to each of the one or more players invited by the host player to join the chat session.

22. The method of Claim 21, wherein the electronic invitation includes an audible announcement apprising any player receiving the electronic invitation that the host player has invited the player to join the chat session.

23. The method of Claim 22, further comprising the step of enabling the electronic invitation to join the chat session to be accepted by a recipient through a verbal response spoken by the recipient, whereupon said recipient becomes a participant in the chat session.

24. The method of Claim 14, wherein each player is a member of an online messaging service that enables the player to build a player contact list comprising a list of one or more players with whom the player prefers to chat and/or play multiplayer online computer games, further comprising the step of:

(a) providing a list of chat sessions that are being hosted by at least one other player contact in a player contact list built by the player; and

(b) enabling the player to join a chat session appearing in the list of chat sessions.

25. The method of Claim 14, further comprising the step of providing a headset operatively coupled in communication with each of said plurality of electronic devices, each headset comprising at least one sound transducer and a microphone employed by each players to participate in a voice chat session.

26. The method of Claim 25, further comprising the step of enabling a player to transmit voice chat data to all of the other players who have joined the voice chat session.

27. The method of Claim 14, further comprising the steps of providing a list of multiplayer online electronic games; and enabling the host player to select the multiplayer online electronic game that will be played.

28. A computer readable medium having computer executable instructions for performing the steps recited in Claim 14.

29.   A method for enabling a host player to select one or more other players to participate in a multiplayer online electronic game played using a plurality of electronic devices linked in communication over a communications network, each of said plurality of electronic devices being operated by a different player, the method comprising the steps of:

(a)   enabling the host player to initiate a voice chat session;

(b)   enabling the host player to invite one or more other players to join the voice chat session;

(c)   enabling any of the players who were invited by the host, to be a participant in the voice chat session;

(d)   enabling the host player to forward a network address corresponding to an electronic device being operated by the host to any other player participating in the voice chat session; and

(e)   transmitting a voice chat message from the host player to any other player participating in the voice chat session, said voice chat message identifying a multiplayer online electronic game that the host player will be launching or has already launched on the electronic device operated by the host player so that any other player participating in the voice chat session can selectively launch an instance of the multiplayer online electronic game on the electronic device operated by the player, so that any player participating in the chat session who selectively launches the multiplayer online electronic game becomes a participant in the multiplayer online electronic game.

30.   The method of Claim 29, wherein the host player is a member of an online messaging service that enables the host player to build a player contact list of one or more players with whom the host prefers to chat and/or play multiplayer online computer games, further comprising the steps of:

(a)   providing the player contact list to the host player; and

(b)   enabling the host player to select one or more players to participate in the multiplayer online electronic game from the player contact list.

31.   The method of Claim 30, further comprising the step of providing an availability status for each player in the player contact list.

32.   A computer readable medium having computer executable instructions for performing the steps recited in Claim 29.

33. A system for enabling a host player to select one or more other players to participate in playing a multiplayer online electronic game played using a plurality of electronic devices linked in communication over a communications network, each of said plurality of electronic devices being operated by a different player and including:

(a) a display on which a user interface is implemented;

(b) a memory in which a plurality of machine instructions are stored; and

(c) a processor coupled to the memory for executing said plurality of machine instructions, said processor implementing a plurality of functions when executing the machine instructions, including:

(i) enabling the host player to initiate a chat session;

(ii) enabling the host player to invite one or more other players to join the chat session;

(iii) enabling any of the players who were invited by the host, to be a participant in the chat session; and

(iv) automatically launching an instance of the multiplayer online electronic game on each electronic device being operated by any player participating in the chat session, said step of automatically launching being in response to a game initiating action performed by the host player so that any player participating in the chat session automatically becomes a participant in the multiplayer online electronic game.

34. The system of Claim 33, wherein the host player is a member of an online messaging service that enables the host player to build a player contact list of one or more players with whom the host may desire to play multiplayer online computer games, and wherein execution of the plurality of machine instructions further implements the functions of:

(a) obtaining the player contact list from the online messaging service;

(b) displaying the player contact list to the host player; and

(c) enabling the host player to select one or more players to participate in the multiplayer online electronic game from the player contact list.

35.   The system of Claim 33, wherein each electronic device includes:

        (a)   a microphone operatively coupled to the electronic device and which produces audio signals in response to words spoken by a user into the microphone; and

        (b)   a least one sound transducer operative coupled to the electronic device so as to replicate sounds corresponding to an audio data signal received over the communications network by the electronic device to which said at least one sound transducer is operatively coupled.

36.   The system of Claim 35, wherein execution of the plurality of machine instructions further implements the function of sending an electronic invitation to join the chat session to a player invited by the host player to join the chat session.

37.   The system of Claim 36, wherein the electronic invitation causes an audible announcement to be produced with said at least one sound transducer apprising each recipient of the electronic invitation that the host player has invited the recipient to join the chat session.

38.   The system of Claim 37, wherein execution of the plurality of machine instructions further implements the function of enabling the electronic invitation to be accepted by a recipient through use of a verbal response spoken into the microphone by the recipient.